



Epstein, Daniel Mark. Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington [review]

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DANIEL MARK EPSTEIN. *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington*. New York: Ballantine, 2004. xx + 380 pp.

The opening sentence of Daniel Mark Epstein's study asserts that "two visionaries, Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman, dominated the American scene from 1855 until 1865 in their respective fields of politics and literature." The looseness of the reasoning here is symptomatic of problems that resurface throughout this book. To say that Whitman "dominated" this decade is to impose a current sensibility upon the past. No matter how one measures cultural domination—prestige, sales, or political impact—Whitman could hardly be called a giant in a mid-nineteenth-century milieu that also included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, Fanny Fern, Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass.

The "parallel lives" of the book's title suggests that this will be a dual biography of sorts, but the work is too selective to qualify as biography. The omissions and emphases regarding Lincoln are especially odd: for example, Epstein tells us a great deal about the setting for the Second Inaugural Address but next to nothing about its content. Rather than developing a full biography of the two men during a crucial decade, Epstein considers instead how they influenced each other and comments on selected moments in their lives. Lincoln's impact on Whitman is no secret to students of the poet's work, but whatever impact Whitman may have had on Lincoln needs to be demonstrated. Noting that Lincoln read the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in his law offices, Epstein concludes that he fell under Whitman's "spell," citing as evidence a number of verbal echoes. In the end, however, all of them could well be coincidental. For example, Lincoln noted: "Writing, the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the eye—is the great invention of the world. Great in the astonishing range of analysis and combination . . . great in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space." While it's true that the phrase "time and space" has some resemblance to Whitman's phrase "It avails not, neither time or place," we can find references to time and place in writing of all kinds.

Popularized history can be entertaining, but the best sort bases its vivid recreations in factual detail. Epstein describes Whitman in Washington as follows: "He didn't rise until after 8:00 A.M., when he dressed and then fetched a pitcher of water from the pump on the corner. He sang all the while, ballads and marches." This type of unverifiable (and improbable) description makes for an odd sort of history. It is likely that Epstein drew this idea about the endlessly singing and humming Whitman from a description that Doyle gave of his walks with the poet: Whitman was "always whistling or singing. We would talk of ordinary matters. He would recite poetry, especially Shakespeare—he would hum airs or shout in the woods." But how Whitman behaved on a walk with Doyle is not necessarily how he would behave while fetching water on a cold morning in the muddy streets of Washington.

The book also suffers from occasional outright errors of fact. In describing Whitman's request that Emerson write for him a letter of recommendation for a government position in 1863, Epstein laments that Whitman's suggested letter "has not survived—a pity, since it might shed some light upon

the obscurities and innuendoes of his petition.” He then goes on to speculate at length about what Whitman’s letter might have said and what his reaction may have been when Emerson agreed to recommend him. But, in fact, Whitman’s letter *has* survived and has been printed several times recently: in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* in 2000 and in 2002 and in Ted Genoways’s recent supplementary volume of Whitman’s *Correspondence*. Other basic factual errors mar this study also. For example, the so-called Blue Book, Whitman’s annotated copy of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, is mistakenly referred to as a proof copy.

The strength of Epstein’s book is in some of its formulations: “‘Song of Myself’ not only belonged to the future, it had been called into being by poems that were yet to be written.” “It seemed that the entire Union was tilting toward Virginia and men were spilling into a deep ditch near Richmond, where Grant smoked cigars and whittled, waiting for the abyss to fill so he could march across it and finish the horrid war.” This book makes for pleasant reading for popular audiences, but those who come to it expecting rigorous analysis of Whitman or Lincoln or their relationship will be disappointed.

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M. WYNN THOMAS. *Transatlantic Connections: Whitman U.S., Whitman U.K.* University of Iowa Press, 2005. xvii + 289 pp.

M. Wynn Thomas’s previous book, *The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 1987) is one of the most important and influential scholarly studies of Whitman; *Transatlantic Connections* is, in many respects, a sequel or companion to this book, and, as such, it is invaluable to any Whitman scholar.

Part of the Iowa Whitman series, *Transatlantic Connections* gathers, revises, expands, and interconnects several previously published essays and two significant essays that I, at least, have not seen before in another form: one chapter on the Whitman-Longfellow relationship and another on Whitman and Edward Carpenter. The chapters stand well individually, but they also illuminate each other within the larger trajectory of Thomas’s scholarship on Whitman. *Transatlantic Connections*, according to Thomas, “is intended to suggest, if not to trigger, a transition in Whitman studies from the historical to new approaches” (xiv). It also represents—or, rather, anticipates—a reorientation in Whitman studies that parallels recent moves towards cultural comparatism (e.g., the cultural history of the Atlantic rim) and away from studies of national cultures in isolation.

The book is divided into two sections: “Whitman U.S.” and “Whitman U.K.,” with somewhat more space given to the former section (about two-thirds of the book). The first section considers Whitman in an American context, interpreting his poetry as the “peculiar product of a new urban experience, a kind of unique inscription of New York politics, a textual attempt to unify national consciousness, a poetic exercise in building labor relations, and